Unspoken

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The Letter Arrives

The lamp had long since gone out, leaving only the weak amber glow of the stove's last ember, which flickered faintly against the cracked plaster ceiling. Stepan Andreyevich Zakharin sat hunched beneath two threadbare blankets, staring at the black wall opposite his cot as if it might answer for the long silence that passed through the room each morning before the city stirred. Cold lay across the floorboards like a sentence, and even the rats had ceased their scurrying beneath the cupboard — either from starvation or resignation. He did not move for several minutes. Breath steamed from his nostrils in uneven wisps.

From outside came the first dull groan of carts on Gorokhovaya Street, iron wheels crushing yesterday's snow into dark slush. Somewhere below, the clockmaker struck a match, cursing softly, always three minutes late. The smell of singed oil and metal filings crept up between the floorboards. Stepan stirred. His knees cracked as he rose.

"Schopenhauer knew," he muttered to no one. "Life is a mistake we insist on repeating."

The kettle was already half-filled, though he did not remember doing it. His fingers fumbled for a match, striking once, then again. The third lit, and he shielded it from the draft with his palm, watching it tremble in the gloom. He touched it to the oil lamp, then bent to coax a flame beneath the kettle. As he crouched, the movement triggered a memory — not of words, but of a tone.

"Stepan…"

He paused, head tilted as though straining to hear it again. Her voice. Not scolding, not pleading — just calling. Long ago. He tightened his jaw and rose slowly, bones aching, and crossed to the window.

With both hands, he lifted the swollen sash. Cold air rushed in like a reproach. The rooftops of Gorokhovaya were blurred with chimney smoke and powdered with crusted snow. Someone was shoveling down the alley, the scrape echoing like iron dragged across glass. Stepan leaned out slightly, spat once, and let the wind carry it.

"Philosophy's for the warm-bellied," he whispered, closing the window again with a wheeze. "The rest of us just freeze and lie about it."

He turned back to the room. One chair, piled with books and a coat that hadn't fit in five years. One table, pockmarked with burns, a broken inkwell staining the corner like dried blood. A shelf sagging under volumes no one borrowed. The air smelled of ash, mold, and ink. A good smell. It meant nothing was new.

The kettle began to mutter. He set out a chipped glass, placed a sugar lump beside it without looking. His fingers trembled slightly. He scowled at them.

“I’ll write today,” he said aloud, though there was no paper left. “I’ll begin with the fall. No —no. I’ll begin with silence.”

He sat, and the chair groaned in agreement. Outside, the first bells of morning rang from the naval college across the canal. Stepan sipped, winced, and wiped his beard with the sleeve of his dressing gown. The cup clicked softly against the saucer. Then he closed his eyes.

The woman’s voice did not return. Only the scrape of the shovel. Only the taste of bitterness on his tongue. Only the sound of the stove giving up.

A knock rattled the wood like an accusation. Stepan froze mid-sip, hand poised in the air, eyes narrowing toward the door. No one knocked at this hour. No one knocked at all, unless it was the landlord demanding arrears or the old widow from downstairs asking again about the smell in the stairwell. He stood, the glass forgotten, one slipper sliding from his heel.

Another knock. Firmer this time.

He opened the door a crack, prepared to sneer, but paused. The figure on the threshold was a boy in the red-trimmed coat of the Imperial Post — young, pale, with a wind-chafed nose and lashes powdered in frost. The boy held out a letter, stiff and pale like a shroud, its edge slightly curled from the cold.

“For Zakharin, Stepan Andreyevich,” he said, then turned and descended the stairs before Stepan could ask who paid for postage.

He closed the door slowly, the envelope clutched in both hands now. It was thick — not a notice, not a bill. The wax seal bore the sigil of the University, crimson and gold pressed by a signet he once kissed as a younger man. His fingers closed tighter, knuckles whitening, but he didn’t open it.

The kettle shrieked behind him.

He flinched, then moved with jerky urgency to remove it from the flame. Sloshing water hissed against the coals. The room filled with a sour steam that clung to the books like guilt. He dropped the kettle onto the windowsill and stood there, breathing heavily, staring at the letter now laid flat across the table.

“I see,” he said aloud. “Three years. Three winters. And now they remember.”

He began to pace, muttering.

“Ah, the bravery of ink! How bold they become behind their desks, warm and fed. Cowards! Every one of them. I bled in front of them — bled my soul in full view — and they laughed. Laughed! Called it impropriety, intemperance, instability. Yes, yes. Madness, perhaps. But truth sounds mad to those who have sold their ears!”

He kicked aside a pile of papers. The air filled with dust.

“They sent me to rot among clocks and grocers. The great Zakharin, drunk on principle, cast into exile while fools scribble footnotes to footnotes. And now, what? An apology? A summons? A punishment disguised as pardon?”

He paused before the mirror, catching his own reflection — wild hair, greyed at the temples, eyes red-rimmed, lips cracked.

“They want me to beg,” he hissed. “But I won’t. I’ll burn it unread.”

He turned from the mirror and stared down at the sealed letter, untouched on the table, as though it might open itself and read him instead.

He sat down heavily, elbows on the table, the letter before him like a slow pulse. His gaze drifted past it, toward the corner where a wine stain darkened the floorboards. Something in that stain pulled him backward, into a memory he did not summon and could not prevent.

The dining hall had been too warm that night, lanterns sputtering above polished silver, every polished face turned expectantly toward the rector as servants moved like shadows between chairs. Stepan remembered the clatter of cutlery, the forced laughter, the smell of veal and pepper, all of it pressing against his temples as though the room itself wished to silence him. He had already drunk more than courtesy allowed; someone had filled his glass twice when he wasn’t looking, and the heat of it had moved through him faster than thought.

At the far end of the table sat the patron — stiff-backed, swaddled in brocade, diamonds glinting at the ears, the smile never quite reaching the eyes. Stepan remembered leaning forward, words rising before he knew their shape. A toast had been proposed. Compliments offered. Gratitude displayed like merchandise. Then his chair scraped the floor.

The room hushed, though in the memory no voices could be heard, only mouths closing, forks held still above plates. He stood with the slow certainty of a man who had forgotten fear. He raised his glass. The benefactor’s jeweled gaze waited.

His lips moved, sound swallowed by the years, yet the words returned with perfect clarity in the silent room where he now sat.

A walking tomb with diamonds in its eyes.

He saw again how the benefactor’s hand tightened around the napkin, how two professors exchanged glances, how the rector’s smile froze mid-curvature. No one rose. No one rebuked him. The silence at that table had been more final than any accusation. A silence that stretched, collapsed inward, and ended everything that followed.

Then the memory drifted: the dismissal conveyed not in person but through a clerk, the door of his office locked before he arrived, colleagues crossing the street to avoid greeting him. Weeks passing in which his name was not spoken once within those walls.

Forgotten. Completely.

The kettle on the sill gave a soft pop as it cooled. Stepan blinked, the memory dissolving like steam. The letter lay still before him, sealed, waiting.

He reached for the letter at last, with a muttered curse as if it had somehow shamed him by surviving this long. The seal broke too easily under his thumb. The wax cracked like old ice. He unfolded the thick paper slowly, suspiciously, as though it might strike back.

At first he didn't read. His eyes scanned the ink as a man might scan a stranger's face on a dark road — hesitant, half-expecting a blow. Then the words began to shape themselves into meaning.

Not from the University. No crest in the heading. No apology. No summons.

Father,
I have arrived. I am in Petersburg now. The city is enormous and cold, but I am well. I have found your address, finally, and will come to you tomorrow if you permit it. I hope it is not an unwelcome surprise. It has been many years. I wish only to see you and to speak as men do.
Your son, Mitya.

Stepan stared at the closing line for a long while, lips slightly parted.

"Your son," he whispered.

He let out a single, brittle laugh — a sound that echoed strangely against the walls and fell quickly into silence, ashamed of itself. Then a second laugh came, darker, fuller, almost joyous in its disbelief.

"Of course," he said aloud. "Of course it would be you."

He sat down too fast. His hip struck the chair and the table jostled. The tea glass tipped and rolled, its contents spreading across a stack of stained notes: unfinished drafts, half-thoughts, a quotation from Epictetus that now blurred into wet grey lines.

He made no move to stop the spill.

The laugh was gone. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Coming to see me," he murmured. "And what will he see?"

The room was too quiet now. Even the street outside had paused, as though the city itself was listening.

He pressed his thumb against the damp paper, smearing the ink. Something about the stain — the way it soaked into the words — struck him as fitting.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow the boy comes to look at the ruin and call it father."

He leaned back, eyes on the ceiling, and let the name form without sound. It rose from somewhere too deep for comfort, too soft for language. He did not say it aloud — he never

had, not once in all the years since. Yet there it was, pressing against his throat like smoke: her name, or the shadow of it.

He remembered the smell of birch bark in her hair, the way her collarbone rose when she laughed, the long silence that followed when she stopped. She had never begged him to stay. That was the worst of it — not the leaving, but the calm in her voice when she said, "Then go, Stepan. You never loved anything long."

He had meant to write, then hadn't. Had meant to visit, then drank instead. And now the boy — their boy — would be knocking at his door as if that absence could be forgiven by arrival.

He stood abruptly. The light had changed. The narrow beam slipping through the broken shutter now angled sharply across the floor. Afternoon already. A day wasted, like so many others.

He pulled a blank sheet from the drawer and set it before him. Dipped his pen, wiped the nib against the cuff of his sleeve, then began.

My dear Mitya,
There are many things a man might say—

He stopped. Crossed out the line. Tried again.

You are welcome here, though I am not what—

Again, no. The pen hovered, then scratched violently. He wrote quickly now, too quickly.

You ought not to come. There is nothing to see. The man you expect is dead or was never real. This place is cold. You are kind. Stay kind—

He stopped. Looked at the mess of ink, of thought, of guilt thinly veiled as advice.

Then, without ceremony, he tore the page in half, then quarters. Each piece dropped into the stove where the earlier flames had long since died. The ash barely stirred.

He opened the drawer again — not the one with paper, but the one beneath it, deeper, where the books used to be before he sold them. From under a folded kerchief and a missing glove, he pulled the bottle. The wax seal had been broken months ago. The vodka inside was cheap, sharp, clear as winter glass.

He poured into the bottom of his tea glass, lifted it halfway, and paused.

"Your mother would have spit at me," he muttered. "Or worse — smiled."

Then he drank. The glass clinked once on the tabletop, and the room returned to silence. Outside, the snow began again, slow and soft, as though it had never stopped.

Ariadna's Salon (Thursday)

The curtains were drawn against the frost, but the cold still seeped through the lace and velvet, brushing the parquet floor like a breath withheld. Ariadna Yegorovna Volkhonskaya lay reclined on her fainting couch with the theatrical languor of a woman long accustomed to being observed. One pale hand trailed from the armrest, limp, while the other clutched a tiny blue bottle of smelling salts just beneath her nose. She inhaled sharply, winced, and sighed as if wounded by the air itself.

"Dunya," she murmured, voice low and hoarse as a forgotten violin, "tell me it will not snow again tonight. I am too tired to endure it."

The maid said nothing. She stood behind the couch with her hands buried in Ariadna's tangled auburn hair, smoothing the strands as carefully as if tending a nest full of invisible creatures. Her apron smelled of starch and candle smoke.

The parlor offered no warmth, despite the fire dying in the tiled stove. Around the room, clocks ticked out of rhythm — a dozen or more, all misaligned, each wounded in its own way. One struck the half-hour, another the hour, another chimed twelve though it was not yet ten. The sound made guests anxious and Ariadna calm.

"They remind me," she once told someone, "that time has no manners."

A silk shawl clung to her shoulders, more for show than comfort. Beneath it, her velvet dress — maroon with fading embroidery — bore faint dust at the hem and a small rip near the seam under the arm. She had noticed it hours ago and spoken of it ever since.

"That dress is a memory," she said now, turning her head just enough for Dunya to catch the command in her tone. "Dust it again. Gently. The threads are older than most of my suitors."

The maid stepped away, retrieved the brush, and began to stroke the fabric in slow, measured sweeps.

Ariadna reached for her compact mirror, opened it with a snap, and studied her own face. The light was not kind.

"My eyes look tired," she said. "I shall say I did not sleep. Men prefer tragedy to age."

The clock near the door groaned and gave one long, wounded chime. Ariadna closed the mirror.

"Dunya," she said, eyes still closed now, "when they arrive, let no one sit near the stove. The warmth reveals too much."

The maid said nothing. One of the clocks began to tick faster, as if mocking them both.

The first knock came too early, as they always did. Dunya opened the door without enthusiasm, revealing a pale young man in a threadbare frock coat, his boots lacquered with

pride rather than polish. He removed his hat as though unveiling a secret and stepped inside with a murmur about the weather, already forgotten.

Behind him came the others in twos and threes, shaking snow from their cuffs, noses red, eyes eager. A painter with a stained sleeve still damp with turpentine, a retired colonel in a uniform two promotions out of date, and a student with ink on his hands and the hollowed cheeks of someone who had eaten little and read too much.

They removed coats, gloves, scarves, shedding them like actors entering a stage they barely believed in. No one asked where the firewood had gone. The absence of warmth was part of the setting.

Ariadna rose — slowly, painfully — from her couch as if summoned by duty rather than desire. Her shawl slipped from one shoulder; she did not adjust it. She moved toward her guests with the grace of an actress playing fatigue.

“Ah,” she said, voice floating above them like perfume. “The city sends me her artists again. What a pity she sends them so hungry.”

The student bowed too low and said nothing. The painter muttered something about inspiration. The colonel coughed into his fist.

They settled into the mismatched chairs around the low table where tea had long since cooled. Ariadna did not pour. That was Dunya’s role. She gestured vaguely and the maid moved like a ghost among them.

“I was reading Byron this morning,” Ariadna began, “and I found myself weeping before the third canto.”

No one responded.

The colonel shifted in his seat, his sword-belt creaking. The painter looked at the nearest clock, which was ticking backward. The student watched Ariadna with something like awe, or confusion.

She let the silence stretch until it threatened to snap. Then she sighed and reclined once more, arranging her dress with the practiced indifference of a woman who expected to be misunderstood.

“Men,” she said softly, “fear poets more than war.”

Still, no one answered. Only one of the clocks replied, ringing thirteen times into a room that had forgotten how to listen.

The door creaked again, and without waiting for Dunya, a figure stepped inside — short, broad-shouldered, bundled in a heavy coat that smelled faintly of coal and cheap tobacco. Foma Ignatievich Rozanov removed his hat with an exaggerated flourish, revealing slicked-down hair still wet from the melted snow. The scent of his cologne preceded him —

something sharp and over-sweet, clinging to the room like desperation. His gloves, too new for his station, betrayed the faintest tag still sewn into the seam.

“Madame Volkhonskaya,” he said, bowing with theatrical reverence.

She did not rise. Her fingers extended toward him languidly, and he stepped forward to kiss them — not too high, not too low. She did not meet his gaze. Her attention remained on the painter, whom she had just asked whether one could truly paint silence.

Rozanov retreated to the corner beside the samovar, removing his gloves with care and stuffing them into his coat pocket. He poured himself a cup without being asked and sipped slowly, watching the others with darting, appraising eyes.

She hadn’t looked at him — not fully — but she knew he was there. Her voice, once pointed toward the colonel, curved subtly, and her words became barbs meant for another target.

“I have often wondered,” she said, “if loyalty is not simply another form of hunger — a desire to be seen by someone who will never look at you.”

The colonel grunted in confusion. The painter blinked. Rozanov stiffened but said nothing.

She turned slightly then, just enough to acknowledge the scent wafting from his coat. “Foma Ignatievich,” she said, “your fragrance arrives before you do. A trait of conquerors or creditors — I forget which.”

A smattering of nervous laughter rose from the room. Rozanov smiled thinly, eyes never leaving her hands as she lifted her teacup to her lips.

He stayed by the samovar, refilling his cup though he barely drank. Listening. Always listening.

She let him stay. She always did. The way a cat allows the mouse to move a little farther before the paw returns.

The room, now thick with the smell of strong tea, damp wool, and cologne, had settled into its usual rhythm of half-thoughts and incomplete truths. The student leaned forward, eager to speak, his voice tremulous as he quoted a line from Herzen on the burden of conscience and the promise of reform.

“Reform,” the colonel muttered, chuckling without humor, “is the name young men give their boredom.”

The painter lifted his cup as though to salute the thought but said nothing. One of the clocks groaned three chimes behind its time.

Siberia crept into the talk next — someone mentioning a cousin sent to Irkutsk for pamphlets he hadn't read. Another claimed the tsar himself was planning a school for convicts. The words floated lazily across the air like chimney smoke: exile, justice, progress. No one believed them, not even the ones who said them.

Ariadna remained still, her eyes drifting between speakers, half-closed, as if the conversation were a music poorly played.

“Art,” the painter offered, finally, “is all that will survive us.”

“And who,” she asked, “survives art?”

They fell silent. Then the student, flushed and trembling, began reciting a poem — his own, most likely — about a girl, a birch tree, and the night. His voice cracked on the last line.

Ariadna yawned without covering her mouth.

“Forgive me,” she said, when the silence became awkward. “It’s not you. I simply tire of metaphors dressed as longing.”

No one laughed. She set her cup down gently, eyes lingering now on the curls of steam that rose from the samovar. Her voice dropped, no longer theatrical, almost private.

“There’s a boy returning to his father in this city,” she said. “A kind boy. The sort who writes thank-you letters in pencil and still closes his eyes when he prays.”

The painter looked confused. The colonel cleared his throat.

“How long,” Ariadna continued softly, “do you think he’ll stay sweet?”

The fire in the stove cracked once. No one answered. One of the clocks began ticking faster, like footsteps receding.

The question hung in the air like breath in winter, too strange to dismiss and too vague to challenge. For a long moment, no one moved. Even the student, who had been fiddling with his spoon, froze mid-stir as though afraid to fracture the silence.

They watched her — all of them — heads slightly tilted, eyes narrowing in that particular way people do when meaning slips just out of reach. The colonel raised one brow, but said nothing. The painter stared at his hands.

Ariadna remained composed, her posture as poised as if she had just quoted Turgenev instead of tossing a stone into a still pond.

Then she smiled. Not widely, not warmly — but with the quiet satisfaction of someone who had planted something unseen and would wait patiently for it to grow.

Without another word, she rose from her seat and crossed the room, her heels clicking softly against the wooden floor. She stopped before the cracked mirror above the fireplace — the same mirror that had reflected a younger face once adorned for theaters, for balconies, for gentlemen who now avoided her name in conversation.

She touched her cheek with two fingers, slowly tracing the line where a wrinkle had begun to form like an old rumor.

“Some boys,” she murmured, not turning, “believe in goodness until it dies in their hands. Others... they learn sooner.”

Her reflection blurred slightly in the fractured glass, cut into pieces by the vein of the crack running through it.

Behind her, Rozanov stood rigid, still by the samovar, the steam curling unnoticed at his elbow. His gaze fixed on the back of her neck — that delicate, pale stretch of skin half-covered by a loosened strand of hair. His hands clenched at his sides, fingers twitching just once before going still.

He did not speak. He never did, when she humiliated him like this — not openly, but with the kind of cruelty that only intimacy makes possible. He watched her, eyes dark with something too old for jealousy and too sharp for love.

She continued to stare into the mirror, as though waiting to see someone else there.

Mitya in the City

The tram shuddered to a stop with a hiss and a groan, as though resentful of its own labor. Mitya stepped down into the slush, one hand gripping a frayed canvas bag, the other clutching a thin book bound in black cloth — the Psalms, marked with a single faded ribbon where the verses spoke of mercy.

The wind met him first, sharp as wire, slicing through the seams of his coat. He blinked against it, shoulders hunched, eyes watering. Around him the street bellowed with life — hooves clattered against stone, shouting erupted from a fishmonger’s stall, smoke poured from chimneys and hung low in the air, thick with soot and the tang of coal.

He turned in a slow circle, mouth parted slightly, taking in everything and nothing. A carriage raced past, its wheels splashing dirty water across his boots. A man barked something from beneath a newspaper cart. A child slipped on the curb and laughed before vanishing into the crowd.

Mitya moved, not knowing where to. The address was folded in his pocket, creased and damp from the journey, but he did not take it out yet. Instead, he followed the motion of people, trusting the crowd to know what he did not.

He passed a bakery and turned down an alley that narrowed too quickly. Realized his error when he emerged into a courtyard where laundry hung stiff and frozen between buildings. He retraced his steps, mouth closed now, cheeks flushed.

He tried again, following the tramline this time, counting house numbers aloud under his breath. When he paused to ask a man in uniform for directions, the man waved him away without looking.

He walked in the wrong direction three times. Each mistake smaller than the last, but none of them unnoticed. By the time he found the right district, the light was beginning to turn. The city was enormous, and the cold had begun to settle into his fingers.

Still, he held the Psalms tightly, as if warmth might rise from the binding. His lips moved slightly, but no sound emerged. It was not a prayer.

The street turned narrow again, cobbled and uneven, where the buildings leaned inward like eavesdropping gossips. Mitya slowed, his boots slipping slightly on the slick stone, and let the city unfold before him.

To his right, an old woman stood on the second floor of a crumbling tenement, furiously beating a rug that hung from her railing like a faded flag. With every strike, a cloud of dust burst into the air and drifted down like ashes. She paused once to spit between her teeth, then resumed as if vengeance were buried in the fabric.

Below her, near a drainage pipe, two children crouched in their coats — one of them no more than six — scraping pieces of bread crust from the gutter with the corners of newspaper. The older child broke one piece and handed it silently to the other. Neither spoke. Their movements were quick, practiced, guarded.

Mitya stopped to watch. His hand tightened on the canvas strap.

Across the street, a noblewoman in a fox-lined coat approached a puddle that stretched like a wound across the road. Her gloved hand flicked once in command, and the servant behind her darted forward to lift the hem of her skirt with one hand while laying a handkerchief across the mud with the other. She crossed without glancing down.

Mitya's eyes followed her until she disappeared behind a lacquered door flanked by brass lanterns. Then he turned back, gaze tracing the alley, the wires strung between chimneys, the broken windows patched with newspaper and wool.

He saw a man selling shoelaces from his palm. A woman with a sack of carrots shouting at a drunk who had sat on them. A cat dead in the snow with its eyes still open.

His expression was not one of judgment. He did not shrink from it. But his mouth remained slightly open, his breath coming faster now. Wonder and confusion worked side by side in his face, like two thoughts that could not agree.

This was not the Petersburg he had imagined in letters, or in sermons, or in his dreams. This was a city of gestures, of hunger, of motions made without thinking. And yet, he kept walking — slower now, but forward all the same.

The scent of bread drew him from the cold like a rope — warm rye and roasted grain seeping from a crooked little shop half-sunk into the street, its windows fogged from the inside. Mitya paused at the door, brushed the snow from his sleeves, and stepped in, bell chiming softly above his head.

The heat struck him first — a furnace somewhere in the back, overfed and overworked. A low counter separated the room from the ovens beyond, where loaves sat stacked in rows, their crusts split open like mouths in sleep. Behind the counter stood a woman in a yellow kerchief, arms bare, flour to the elbows, wiping her hands on a stained apron.

Mitya offered a polite bow.

“Pardon me,” he said, clearing his throat, “I’m looking for Gorokhovaya Street. Number forty-seven, above the—”

The woman squinted at him, then snorted.

“Not buying, are you?”

“No, I—”

“Then out with you. This isn’t the tsar’s post.”

“I only—”

She slapped the counter with one hand. “Father’s fool,” she muttered, turning away. “Too clean for the gutter, too dumb for the seminary.”

He stood there a moment longer, not moving, the bell above the door still swaying slightly. Then he turned, nodded once — to no one — and left.

The cold met him again like a slap. He crossed the street blindly, no longer watching the numbers, and came upon a boy with a basket of newspapers shouting headlines he couldn’t quite hear. Mitya reached into his pocket and pulled out three kopecks, warm from his palm.

“One copy,” he said.

The boy reached out, but before Mitya could hand him the coins, a shadow passed between them — a man, stooped and limping, with a face creased like old leather. His hand shot forward, touched Mitya’s sleeve.

“Bless you, sir,” he muttered. “Bless your good mother.”

Mitya stared at him. The man’s eyes were filmy, his breath heavy. He smelled of wool and fire.

Mitya gave him the coins without speaking.

The man nodded twice, tucked them into his coat, and vanished down the alley without a word more.

The newspaper boy shrugged.

Mitya smiled faintly and stepped away, empty-handed, the smell of bread still clinging to his coat.

By the time he reached the right street, the light had begun to bend low across the rooftops, catching the windows with a copper glow that made even the cracked panes gleam like stained glass. The numbers on the doors came slower now, carved in fading brass or painted crookedly in flaking white. He stopped twice to check the address, unfolding the paper with stiff fingers, eyes moving from it to the facades around him, lips forming the number again and again.

There — a narrow entry tucked between a clockmaker's shop and a tobacconist whose shutters were half drawn. The building leaned slightly to one side, as though tired of standing. Its plaster had long since surrendered to damp and smoke.

He did not use the front door. He found the side entrance — a crooked gate, rusted hinges — and stepped into the dim corridor where the air smelled of wet stone, vinegar, and something sweeter beneath, like old fruit left too long in a drawer.

The stairs creaked beneath him as he climbed, his hand trailing the wall where the banister had once been. He passed a door with a child's name chalked across it, another with laundry hanging from the handle. A cat blinked at him from the third landing, then vanished between gaps in the boards.

Finally, he reached the top floor.

The door was unpainted, warped from damp. The number was gone, replaced with a small nail driven into the wood — a mark, perhaps, or a signal to someone who knew the place better.

He stood before it and listened.

Nothing. No voices. No footstep. No creak of furniture or rustle of paper. Only the wind outside and the faint whistle of air escaping through the windowpanes.

He knocked.

A pause. Still nothing.

He raised his hand again and knocked once more, this time more firmly.

The sound echoed dully in the hallway behind him.

He lowered his hand, unsure. For a moment he thought of turning back, of writing a note, of waiting below. But his feet stayed planted, and his fingers curled at his side, holding tightly to the Psalms in his coat pocket.

Still no answer. The door remained still as stone.

He hesitated only a moment longer before raising his hand once more. The knock this time was louder, clearer, echoing off the hallway walls with a hollow finality, as if the sound itself refused to be ignored.

A rustle. A chair leg scraped the floor. A thud, like something knocked over. Then silence again.

The door creaked open by degrees, no sudden movement, only the slow groan of the hinges giving way to a crack of dim yellow light from within.

Stepan stood in the threshold, leaning against the doorframe as though it alone kept him upright. His skin was pale and blotched with cold; he wore no shirt, only a pair of sagging trousers held by one suspender slung low across his hip. His chest rose in shallow breaths. The smell of vodka clung to him, sharp and bitter, mixed with the lingering smoke of last night's fire.

His eyes, red-rimmed and unfocused, settled on Mitya with the disbelief of a man waking into a nightmare he once hoped for. His lips parted slightly, but no words came at first.

Mitya stood straight, coat buttoned to the neck, the canvas bag clutched in one hand, snow still melting in his hair. He smiled — not the confident smile of a young man sure of himself, but something quiet, tentative, hopeful.

"I'm here, Father," he said.

Stepan said nothing for a long breath. His fingers gripped the edge of the door.

"You shouldn't be," he said at last, the words low and raw, as if torn from a place deeper than his throat.

Then he stepped aside. Not enough to welcome, not enough to invite — just enough for the boy to enter if he chose.

Grigory Bubnov's Rooms

The walls of Grigory Bubnov's study were the color of tobacco smoke and ambition — once ivory, now the hue of dried paper, dulled by years of cigars and secrets. Heavy curtains held back the morning, though a blade of light sliced across the floorboards and revealed the slow accumulation of dust between the parquet grooves.

He sat behind a desk of dark walnut, its surface cluttered with unopened parcels wrapped in twine, a brass paperweight shaped like a snarling lion, and a silver letter-opener stained faintly at the tip. A clock ticked too quickly behind him, its pendulum anxious, as if the hour had somewhere else to be.

Bubnov leaned forward in his chair, elbows planted on the desk, staring at a folded report that trembled slightly in his grip — not from nerves, but from a silent, mounting delight.

The paper was headed in official blue ink, the handwriting precise, calculated.

Tenant: Zakharin, Stepan Andreyevich
Room unpaid — three months in arrears
Observed meeting with student outside Nevsky Prospekt — topic unclear
Suspected influence on younger pupils — ideological in nature

Bubnov's mouth curved upward — not a smile, not yet. More a baring of teeth.

"Influence," he said aloud, tasting the word. "As if rot were a form of persuasion."

Across the room, his manservant was crouched on a stool, polishing a pair of boots already gleaming from prior labor. The boy did not look up. He had long since learned that silence in Bubnov's presence was not a virtue but a survival instinct.

Bubnov reached for a fountain pen, uncapped it, and jotted a small, almost imperceptible note in the corner of the page: *Hold. Do not act yet.*

Then he sat back, tapping the pen lightly against his lower lip.

"Zakharin," he whispered, savoring the name. "A ruined man still clinging to matches. Let's see what else he sets alight."

The boots gleamed like accusations in the half-light. The clock ticked faster.

Bubnov leaned back in his chair, one hand resting flat on the report as though to pin it in place, the other gesturing lazily toward the servant boy, who straightened at once and approached the writing desk with practiced, silent steps.

"Notebook," Bubnov murmured. "Ink. And bring me the brown parchment — not the white. The thick stock."

The servant obeyed without question. Within moments, Bubnov was uncapping the inkwell and straightening his posture, his voice slipping into the smooth rhythm of dictation, a rhythm he reserved for matters that were neither urgent nor innocent.

"To Pavel Vasilievich," he began. "Remind him that the delay in payment on his carriage license is now under review by the urban district. If it remains unpaid by month's end, I will be compelled to escalate the matter. Notarized."

He paused, then smiled faintly. "Add: 'This warning is offered as a courtesy, between friends.'"

The servant scribbled quickly, eyes down.

Bubnov set that page aside, reached for another.

"To Madam Ariadna Yegorovna Volkhonskaya." His tone shifted — lighter, almost amused. "Enclose a small note: 'In light of recent expenses, it has come to my attention that certain arrangements may be burdensome. I remain at your service should discretion be required in financial matters.' Sign it simply: 'Ever your servant in practicalities.'"

He chuckled once, under his breath.

Then the third: “To Ivan Arkhipov at the Lyceum. A quiet inquiry. ‘Would you be so kind as to confirm whether any former lecturers have had recent contact with current students under your care? Purely a matter of recordkeeping. I am, as always, committed to maintaining the highest educational standards in the buildings under my lease.’”

Three letters, three tones, each precise in its weight and wound.

Bubnov reached forward and selected three paperweights — a bronze serpent for the first, a jade lily for Ariadna, and a smooth river stone carved with the image of a closed eye for the Lyceum. He placed each deliberately atop its respective letter.

Generosity — offered in just the right measure to become dependence. Concern — phrased kindly enough to wound.

He looked at the envelopes with something close to affection.

“Send them before dusk,” he said. “People read more carefully when the light fails.”

Bubnov rose from his chair with the slow grace of a man who believed time moved in obedience to his will. He crossed the room to the sideboard, where a decanter of cognac glowed like amber caught in smoke. He poured a measure into a crystal glass — the sound delicate, almost ceremonial — and held it to the light, admiring the color.

He did not drink.

Instead, he set the glass untouched on the edge of the mantle and turned toward the mirror that hung above it — oval, framed in gilt, slightly tarnished at the edges where the silver had begun to peel.

He studied his own reflection for a moment — the careful neatness of his beard, the shine on his cuffs, the cool calculation in his eyes — then parted his lips and let out a short laugh.

It rang too sharp, too sudden. A bark.

He frowned. Tried again, softening the mouth, adjusting the brow, letting the sound rise more gradually from the chest. This time, it resembled something closer to mirth, though it still felt hollow as a coin struck against wood.

Again.

The third laugh was quieter, more supple, ending with the hint of breath through the nose. Acceptable. He nodded once, satisfied.

Behind him, the door creaked open.

A different servant now — older, with sunken cheeks and a voice that had long ago lost the impulse toward curiosity.

“Rozanov is asking to speak to you,” he said. “He’s in the vestibule.”

Bubnov did not turn from the mirror.

“Did he say why?”

The servant hesitated. “He says it concerns Volkhonskaya.”

A pause.

The corner of Bubnov’s mouth twitched — not a smile, not quite. Just a recognition of the way certain pieces began to shift on their own.

He reached for the cognac, lifted it, but still did not drink.

“Let him wait five minutes,” he said. “Then bring him in.”

The servant bowed once and disappeared.

Bubnov remained before the mirror, the glass raised, the practiced laugh still lingering in the corners of his face like a fog refusing to lift.

The door opened with the soft scrape of hinges that had been oiled just that morning. Foma Rozanov entered, hat crushed between his hands, the smell of damp wool and cologne rising from his coat like an apology. He bowed too deeply, then straightened and stood awkwardly in the center of the rug, unsure where to rest his gaze.

Bubnov did not rise to greet him. He remained seated, legs crossed, the untouched glass of cognac still warming beneath his fingers.

“Well?” he said, not unkindly.

Foma cleared his throat, then launched into it all at once — a torrent of murmured flattery, breathless need, scraps of information half-spoken, half-suppressed. He shifted from foot to foot, voice wobbling between eagerness and shame. Ariadna’s name surfaced quickly. Her debts. Her strange refusals. The shrinking guest lists. The pawned jewelry returned unmentioned.

“She plays strong,” Foma said, eyes on the floor, “but the creditors come before the guests now. Even the dress she wore last week — it was stitched over. I saw the lining. She doesn’t know I saw.”

Bubnov said nothing.

Foma looked up quickly, then down again.

“And there was something else. A letter, maybe. Hidden. She read it twice, then burned it. I — I don’t know what it said. But she was different after. Quiet. Like a... like a church before a storm.”

Bubnov tapped the rim of his glass with one finger.

“She spoke once,” Foma continued, “of a boy. Years ago. Not by name. Just said he had the wrong eyes. That was all. No one noticed. But I did.”

Now Bubnov smiled. It moved slowly across his face, as though savored.

“Good,” he said. “Let her owe me.”

Foma nodded, the motion small and sharp, as if afraid of agreement. A flush crept up his neck — part pride, part filth.

Bubnov waved one hand gently, dismissing him like a dog too eager to please.

“Watch her,” he said. “And say nothing. Especially not when she expects it.”

Foma bowed again, this time without rising fully. Then he left, the door closing behind him like a lid on something newly unearthed.

The door clicked shut, muffling Rozanov’s retreating steps like footsteps fading beneath snow. Bubnov remained seated, unmoving, his gaze fixed on the door long after it had closed. The room had fallen still again — no rustle of paper, no creak from the hearth, only the fast-ticking clock behind him, persistent, impatient.

He reached slowly for the report on his desk, smoothed its edge, then turned to the last page where the margins were clean and wide.

He uncapped his pen, dipped it once, and in a practiced hand wrote a single line across the bottom:

Zakharin’s son. Watch him.

He underlined nothing. Emphasis was for amateurs.

Then he folded the report with care, pressed it closed beneath the serpent paperweight, and leaned back once more into the silence of the room.

Outside, the bells of the naval college rang — high and distant — marking the hour with a clarity the city rarely allowed.

Threads and Needles

Snow fell in thin, straight lines, not drifting but dropping — like pins shaken loose from the hand of something above. The streets were near silent in the half-light of dawn, when horses hadn't yet stirred and the bells remained dormant behind frosted glass.

Anna Khrustaleva moved quickly, boots crunching over frozen slush, one hand clutching the strap of her worn sewing bag, the other holding a wrapped loaf close against her coat. Her

scarf was pinned crooked over one shoulder, where the wind had caught it earlier and she had stabbed it in place without slowing.

Her face was pale from the cold and early hour. Lips cracked, cheeks red with exposure. She walked with her chin down and her back stiff, not from pride but from habit — the habit of slipping through the city before it looked.

A thread hung from her sleeve, gold or yellow, whipping back in the wind. She did not notice. Her eyes were focused ahead, on the faint orange glow at the end of the lane where the bakery's chimney smoked and a lamplighter's pole leaned against the wall.

She hummed as she walked, a single note repeated under her breath. Not a song. Just one sound, over and over — thin, high, barely heard. Like something meant to keep rhythm rather than offer music.

The loaf under her arm was wrapped in old paper tied with a bit of frayed ribbon. A gift, or a bribe, or a favor owed — all three were the same thing in this part of the city.

When she passed the butcher's stall shuttered for the day, she glanced at her reflection in the blackened glass, noted the pin slipping in her scarf, and left it. No time to fix it now.

By the time the first bell sounded from St. Nicholas, she had already turned the corner, her bag shifting at her side with the steady jingle of scissors and needles.

The building leaned with age, brick bowed outward like tired lungs exhaling. Inside, the air was warm and stale — not from fire, but from bodies too long indoors, windows sealed against the cold. Anna climbed the narrow stair without hesitation, passing doors marked by towels wedged under cracks and bootprints dried in ash.

On the second floor, she paused before the door with the black thread tied around the knob. No knock. She entered quietly.

The room was dim, smelled of vinegar and iron. A fire sputtered in a tin stove near the wall, more smoke than heat. In the corner, half-covered by wool blankets, lay the old woman — her skin yellowed, drawn tight over the bones of her face, eyes shut, lips moving faintly though no sound came.

Anna crossed the room in three steps, set the loaf on the shelf beside a chipped glass of water, and knelt by the cot. From her sewing bag, she pulled a square of cloth, a flask, a small tin. She did not speak.

She worked quickly — removed the stained bandages, cleaned the wound, pressed clean linen against the skin. The old woman flinched once but did not wake. The only sound was Anna's breath, steady, faintly audible in the silence.

When the task was done, Anna stood. She checked the corners of the blanket, adjusted one, pulled the lamp a little farther from the bed.

As she turned to go, the woman stirred — eyes half-lidded now, lips parted.

“Thank you,” she whispered, the words dry as paper.

Anna paused in the doorway, nodded once — not solemn, not kind, only firm — and left without closing the door fully behind her.

Outside, the sky had turned from grey to steel. She didn’t pause. Her feet moved with certainty now, weaving through alleys, past crates of frozen apples, across a market square where dogs picked at the edges of stalls.

By the time she reached Ariadna’s building, the sun had risen behind a gauze of cloud. She did not knock. The maid opened the door before she could raise her hand.

No words passed between them.

The maid stepped aside, and Anna entered, the sewing bag brushing her hip with the faint whisper of thread against wood.

Ariadna stood in the center of the parlor, one arm across her chest, her bodice half-undone, silk gathered in her hand like a captured breath. The cracked mirror above the mantel caught her profile — bare shoulder, faint bruising at the ribs, a thin ribbon of lace torn clean through near the seam.

“My corset,” she said sharply, as though it had betrayed her. “Ruined. And on the one week I needed it to speak well of me.”

Anna knelt beside the fainting couch without a word, drawing her sewing kit open on the upholstery like a map of old instruments. She pulled the corset from Ariadna’s outstretched hand, laid it flat across her knee, and began to thread her needle with unbroken rhythm.

“It tore in front of Rozanov,” Ariadna went on, pacing the rug in slow circles. “Not all at once — a quiet little snap, like a mouse cracking its neck.”

Anna set the first stitch. Her fingers moved in silence. The needle passed through fabric with the sound of precision.

“I told him I meant it to tear,” Ariadna continued, “that it was an old superstition — the garment that wounds you will shield you. He laughed, of course. Men always laugh when they’re being lied to.”

A small clock rang from the other room — not properly, just a chime like a question someone forgot to ask.

“There’s a boy in the city,” Ariadna said, voice shifting, her gaze unfixed. “A sweet one, they say. The kind who writes to his father and says ‘sir’ without irony. Poor child. No one’s told him what the past does to a man.”

Anna folded the edge of the seam with the back of her nail and began the next line. The thread slipped cleanly. She did not look up.

“His father,” Ariadna murmured, almost to herself, “was once very beautiful. A shame how disgrace can ruin the shape of a face.”

Anna tied off a knot. Perfect. Invisible. She began to reinforce the hem without changing pace.

Ariadna stopped pacing. “Are you listening?”

Anna gave no sign. Her eyes remained on the corset. Her stitches were even, close, quiet — a language that never needed speaking.

Ariadna sat now, draped along the couch with one hand propped against her cheek, her eyes fixed on Anna’s bowed head as if trying to read a thought through the curve of a neck. The repaired corset lay between them like a question, not yet answered, not yet dismissed.

“You once said you had no children,” Ariadna said softly, her voice coiling like smoke. “But you lied, didn’t you?”

The silence that followed was heavy, but not uncomfortable. Anna did not flinch, did not pause her hands. She threaded the final stitch, pulled it taut with quiet certainty, then clipped it neatly with a small pair of shears.

She folded the corset in half, set it gently beside Ariadna’s arm, and rose without hurry.

Ariadna watched her, eyes narrowed just slightly. “That’s your third lie this week.”

Anna reached for her sewing bag, checked the clasp, adjusted the strap across her shoulder. She glanced toward the window, where snow had begun again, light and dry — a scattering more than a storm.

“I’ll come next Thursday,” she said.

And then she turned and walked toward the door, her boots silent on the rug.

Ariadna didn’t move. She listened as the latch clicked shut, then turned her head slightly toward the repaired seam resting on her lap. She touched it once with the tip of her finger, then let her hand fall away.

Outside, the air struck sharper than before, thin as glass. The street was nearly empty — a delivery cart creaked somewhere far off, a bell rang on a passing sledge, but the alley beside Ariadna’s building stood quiet, shadowed by the overhang of eaves and icicles that hung like needles above the stone.

Anna stepped into it without looking back. She stopped just beyond the stoop, between two shuttered cellar windows, and stood motionless. Her sewing bag hung from her shoulder,

gripped now with both hands, held tightly against her side as though the fabric within were warm and breathing.

She didn't blink.

Snow began to settle on her coat, on the slant of her shoulders, in her hair. Fine white flecks clung to the ridges of her scarf and vanished into the folds. She didn't brush them off.

Her mouth was closed, her breath shallow. No expression passed her face — not anger, not grief, not thought — only the stillness of something not yet named.

A minute passed. Then another.

She shifted her weight slightly. Looked once down the length of the alley, once up.

And then, with the same quiet steadiness as before, she moved on. Her boots left narrow prints in the snow. Within the bag, her scissors clicked faintly with each step, like a small creature stirring in its sleep.

Three Visitors

The stove had gone out in the night, and the room clung to its own dampness — ink, smoke, and the faint sour tang of boiled oats gone stiff in their bowl. Light came weakly through the frost-clawed window, casting bars of pale gray across the warped floorboards.

Mitya swept in slow, careful strokes, pushing soot, crumbs, and old ash toward a waiting dustpan. His coat was still buttoned to the top, though his breath no longer smoked in the air. He moved quietly, trying not to disturb the papers spread across the desk — half-finished letters, scribbled passages from obscure books, a treatise on *Zarathustra* written in the margins of a ledger.

Stepan paced the floor in his shirtsleeves, his feet bare on the wood. His voice rose and fell, dramatic and uneven, as he gestured with a chipped spoon.

"The mistake of the age," he declared, "is its thirst for structure. Autocracy, republics — it's all the same theater. Nietzsche saw it. A man does not need order. He needs a height from which to fall."

Mitya paused with the broom. "But what if he climbs to lift others?"

Stepan turned sharply.

"There is no lifting," he said. "There is only pulling — down, always down. The moment you forgive a man, you lower yourself into his filth."

Mitya looked at him, expression unchanged. "But if no one is forgiven, then we become our worst moment."

The silence snapped. Stepan slammed his palm on the table. The spoon leapt. The bowl of porridge trembled.

“You quote priests in a dead room, boy,” he growled. “Is that what you think this is? Some sentimental tale of return?”

Mitya looked down, brushing the last pile of dust into the pan. The broom clicked once against the wall.

The porridge sat untouched on the table, gray and thick, two spoons stuck into its surface like flags in a conquered land.

The knock came sharp and quick, two short raps followed by a pause, as though the visitor were unsure of the right to insist. Stepan froze mid-sentence, his hand still on the table, while Mitya set the broom aside and stepped to the door.

When he opened it, Rozanov filled the frame like a question uninvited — hunched in a dark coat, snow on his shoulders, hat pressed to his chest. He smiled faintly when he saw Mitya, though his eyes flicked past him to the room behind.

“Good morning,” he said, voice low, almost pleasant. “I come with news. Unpleasant, I’m afraid.”

Stepan had not moved. “That would be new for you, Foma Ignatievich.”

Rozanov entered without waiting, standing just inside the threshold, stamping snow from his boots. His gaze swept over the room — the unwashed bowl, the scraps of paper, the frost tracing the inside of the window.

“Rumors,” he began. “Idle, no doubt. But when Bubnov hears even idle rumors, he tends to write letters.”

Stepan’s lip curled. “Let him. The man wouldn’t recognize thought if it crawled into his inkpot.”

Rozanov smiled with his mouth only. “Thought, no. But influence — that’s something he notices.”

He turned his head slightly toward Mitya. “Especially when students begin to visit men in rooms above clock shops. Men who owe three months’ rent.”

Mitya moved toward the shelf where the samovar sat cold. “Would you like tea?”

Rozanov waved a hand. “No. No time.”

Stepan crossed his arms. “You didn’t come to drink. Say what you came to say.”

Rozanov hesitated, then shrugged, as if the matter were out of his hands. “Bubnov is considering eviction. Quietly, of course. With tact. There may also be... a file. Something bureaucratic. Delicate. Names may be involved.”

Stepan laughed once — sharp, bitter. “A file? Let them file me. I’ve been misfiled my whole life.”

Rozanov stepped back toward the door. “Still,” he murmured, “it might be best to leave the city.”

He nodded once to Mitya — neither friendly nor cold — then pulled the door shut behind him with a quiet finality.

The wind pressed against the glass. Inside, the air felt suddenly smaller.

The silence after Rozanov’s departure hung in the room like dust unsettled. Stepan remained at the table, one hand pressed against his temple now, while Mitya moved absently toward the samovar, touched the handle, and let it go.

Then, another knock — softer, lower. A pause between the first and second tap, like someone reluctant to disturb what they knew lay inside.

This time, neither man moved at once. Mitya looked to his father, but Stepan didn’t speak. He rubbed his forehead, as though the knock were inside his skull.

Mitya opened the door.

Anna stood there, pale from the wind, her scarf pinned neater than before, her boots dusted white at the toes. She said nothing. Her eyes moved once over Mitya’s shoulder, toward the table, the clutter, the still air.

Then she reached into her sewing bag and pulled out a folded bundle — dark wool, neatly stitched, the shoulders brushed clean, the buttons replaced with mismatched ones of bone and horn. She stepped past Mitya and held it out.

Stepan looked up. His brow furrowed.

He didn’t reach for it, but she laid the coat gently on the edge of the table, beside the bowl of congealed porridge.

“It’s yours,” she said. “Don’t catch death.”

Her voice was level, unhurried.

She turned then, toward Mitya. Their eyes met — not long, not searching, but full enough that the silence between them shifted. Something stirred, like a curtain lifting before a window not yet opened.

Anna gave a slight nod — not a farewell, not a promise — then turned and stepped back through the door, pulling it closed behind her with the quiet care of someone who knew how thin the walls were.

Neither man spoke for a long time.

The coat sat between them, heavy, repaired, still warm from her hands.

The third knock came less than ten minutes later — quick, businesslike, impatient. Mitya, still standing near the door, opened it without hesitation. A boy in a gray cap stood there, cheeks red from the cold, a leather satchel slung across his chest.

“Message for Zakharin,” he said, holding out a folded slip sealed in wax, a curl of perfume already rising from the paper.

Mitya took it. The courier turned and vanished before a kopeck could be offered.

Stepan had already risen, eyes narrowed. “Who?”

Mitya looked down. The handwriting was unmistakable — tall, slanting, almost lazy. Ariadna’s name wasn’t written, but it didn’t need to be. He began to open the seal.

Stepan strode across the room, snatched the note from his hand with sudden violence.

“Not in this house,” he muttered.

Before Mitya could object, Stepan had crossed to the stove, pulled open the iron hatch, and thrust the paper into the ash-black mouth.

A sudden flare of flame caught the edge — violet, then orange — and the wax bubbled before collapsing inward. The fire chewed through the note hungrily, curling the corners, swallowing the signature before Mitya could read it.

Stepan stood with the door open, watching the last of it blacken and fold.

“She poisons everything she touches,” he said, not loudly, not in rage, but with a cold certainty that closed all doors behind it.

Mitya said nothing.

He stepped closer, standing at a slight angle from the stove, watching the fire settle. The flames had quieted now, reduced to a glow.

Whatever had been written was gone, and neither of them looked away.

The room had fallen into its usual darkness by evening, lit only by the faint orange pulse from the stove and the occasional flicker from a streetlamp filtering through the frost-rimmed window. Stepan had fallen asleep in the chair, arms crossed, chin tucked to his chest, a thread of dried porridge at the corner of his mouth.

The coat Anna had returned lay folded at his feet.

Mitya sat still for a long while, watching the fire reduce its breath to embers. When the sound of his father’s snores steadied into a rhythm, he moved — quietly, deliberately — lifting the stove hatch with a cloth to muffle the creak.

The ashes were still warm. He reached in with a scrap of paper and coaxed the remains of the burned note into a fold, black dust clinging to his fingers like secrets. He tucked it into the lining of his coat, between the stitching and the thread.

He buttoned the coat fully. Pulled on his boots without sound.

Outside, the hall was silent, the only noise the occasional creak of old timber settling into its winter bones.

Mitya stepped out and closed the door behind him without latch or sound. Then he made his way down the stairs, each step soft, careful, as if descending into something he hadn't yet named.

The ashes in his pocket stirred with his movement — fine, black, almost weightless. But he felt them all the same.

Ariadna's Confession

The building was quiet as a tomb when Mitya arrived, its windows shuttered against the wind, its lamps long since extinguished. A doorman nodded without looking up, and the corridor swallowed him in velvet darkness, where every footstep was stolen by the carpet.

At the top of the stair, the door was ajar. He knocked once anyway. No reply — only a murmur of candlelight flickering against the ceiling.

He stepped inside.

Ariadna stood in the center of the drawing room, wrapped in a robe of faded silk that clung to her like memory. The fabric shimmered faintly in the low light, tinged gold where the candles kissed it. She turned her head toward him but did not approach.

"So," she said softly, her voice coiled around the air, "my angel does come when called."

Mitya didn't speak. He stepped further into the room, the door closing behind him with a hush.

She toyed with a necklace at her throat — a broken strand of garnets, the clasp held together with thread. The gems caught the candlelight and gleamed like droplets of dried blood.

"Tea?" she asked, already lifting the lid of the samovar. "I had it prepared just in case. But perhaps..." She paused, glanced toward a decanter.

"Perhaps wine instead?"

He hesitated. "I—"

She laughed, low and warm, and crossed the room in two slow steps. “Just one. For your nerves. Or for mine.”

She poured without waiting for his answer, the wine dark and slow as ink. One glass. Then another. She handed him the first and touched the rim of her own to his without a sound.

“To angels,” she said. “And to what they never ask.”

The candle beside her guttered once, then flared. The necklace slipped down to the hollow of her throat.

Ariadna settled into the chair by the hearth, her robe slipping at the shoulder, unnoticed. She gestured for Mitya to sit, but he remained standing, glass in hand, gaze fixed somewhere between her eyes and the fire.

The wine had deepened the candlelight, made the shadows more fluid, like they too were listening.

She tilted her head back, watching the ceiling as she spoke, her voice distant, as though translating something from a language only she remembered.

“There was a philosopher once,” she said, fingers brushing her glass. “Full of words. Full of ghosts, really. He quoted Latin even in his sleep, and underlined books until the margins bled. I loved him.”

She smiled faintly. “But he didn’t notice. He was too in love with his despair. Some men are like that — they court ruin with such elegance, you mistake it for grace.”

Mitya didn’t move.

“There was a child,” she went on, more quietly now. “Not a secret, not quite. But not exactly claimed either. A mistake, some said. A rumor, others. I called him mine. He had my eyes, at least before they changed.”

Her gaze dropped to the floor.

“He vanished into the provinces. They sent him far, far off. No one asked where. It was cleaner that way. I mourned, but no one believed it. Grief on a woman like me looks too much like performance.”

She looked up at Mitya then. The fire reflected in her eyes, but not brightly.

“I wasn’t meant to keep things,” she said. “Only decorate them.”

The clock in the hallway struck once — a single, lonesome chime. Neither of them stirred.

The fire cracked once in the grate, a faint burst of cinders tumbling inward. Mitya stood without shifting, the wine untouched in his hand. His shadow fell long across the carpet, merging with hers.

He spoke quietly, the words coming slow. “Was it him?”

Ariadna did not ask whom he meant. She only nodded once, the movement barely there — more in the eyes than the head.

“I thought so,” Mitya said.

She looked at him. “Are you angry?”

He stared into the fire. “No.”

A silence passed between them, thin and open.

She leaned back in the chair, her hands now resting lightly on her lap, the garnet necklace forgotten, one stone resting in the crease of her collarbone.

“I never wanted to be a mother,” she said, not with defiance, but with something softer — a fact too long buried to sting. “I wanted to be... seen. Or maybe just left alone.”

She stood slowly, came to him without rustle or drama. He didn’t move as she stepped close.

She placed one hand gently on his cheek, then kissed his forehead — lightly, without hesitation. Her lips were cool from the wineglass.

“Forgive me,” she whispered, “for what I was not.”

Then she turned away and walked back toward the chair, her bare feet soundless on the rug. The wine in his hand caught the firelight, trembling slightly. He did not drink.

The door closed behind him with a soft click, barely louder than the wind whispering through the shuttered alley. Mitya stood for a moment outside her apartment, staring at the worn wood grain before descending the stairs without looking back.

Each step felt lighter than the one before, though not in relief. There was a strange tightness in his chest, as though a page had turned too quickly and the words had not yet caught up.

He stepped out into the street. Snow gathered again in the gutters. The sky above was flat, moonless.

Behind the curtain, high above, Ariadna stood at the window, her hands clasped in front of her, eyes following the figure below as it disappeared beneath the gaslight.

She exhaled slowly. A flick of her fingers drew the fabric aside, just slightly, enough to watch him cross the square.

“He’s too good,” she said softly, to no one.

Then, after a pause — as if answering something that hadn’t been asked —

“That won’t last.”

The curtain fell back into place. The room behind her returned to shadow.

The fire had burned low, and the room was still, heavy with the sweetness of the wine and the wax-smoke of extinguished candles. Ariadna stood at the mantel, one hand resting on the garnets at her neck, when the latch turned without warning.

The door opened.

Grigory Bubnov stepped inside as if he had always belonged to the room. He did not pause, did not greet. He simply closed the door behind him, removed his gloves with a methodical grace, and let his eyes sweep over the parlor — the fainting couch, the unfinished wine, the robe.

Ariadna didn't flinch. She remained by the fire, head slightly inclined.

"We'll take care of your debts now, won't we?" he said, voice smooth as ink.

She nodded once, without turning. "Yes."

Bubnov moved further in, placing his gloves carefully on the small table near the samovar. He did not sit.

"But don't harm the boy," she said. Her tone was flat. Not pleading. Not defiant.

A silence passed. Then Bubnov gave the faintest smile — not warmth, but approval of an expected move in a familiar game.

"We never harm the ones who leave," he said.

Then he picked up the half-full glass she had abandoned, looked into it, and set it back down without drinking. The fire gave a soft sigh behind them. Nothing more was said.

Snowfall, Stillness

Snow had fallen through the night without wind, piling thick and soundless across rooftops, iron fences, and the shoulders of statues staring forever into the gray. By morning, the city lay under a quiet so complete that even the bells of the churches rang with less conviction, their notes caught and softened by the weight of white.

Mitya walked alone down an unshoveled lane, his boots leaving crisp, narrow tracks behind him. The snow reached to his calves in places, and he moved slowly, not out of weariness but because there was no reason to hurry.

The Neva drew him like a thread. Somewhere beneath that broad white field, the current still moved — unseen, patient, strong.

He passed three beggars huddled near a gas lamp, their coats wrapped tight, one coughing into a kerchief too small to do anything but mark the sound. A mangy dog barked far away, the echo lost almost instantly in the muffling hush of snow.

Mitya didn't speak. He met no one's eye.

In his coat pocket was a folded letter, worn at the crease where his thumb had pressed it over and over. It was unfinished — a beginning, a question, a hesitation that hadn't resolved into an address or a name.

He had written it the night before, sitting by the stove while his father slept, and hadn't touched it since. Still, he felt its presence with every step, as if the words themselves had weight, and carried themselves forward even while the rest of him lagged behind.

At the riverbank, the world narrowed to white and silence. The Neva stretched wide before him, frozen in uneven planes — smooth in the center, but near the edges, the ice revealed veins of black water threading just beneath, alive and waiting.

Mitya stopped a few steps from the embankment. He looked down at the edge, where snow had begun to slump into a dark, slushy crust. A crack ran jagged across the surface like a split in glass.

He took off his gloves, slowly, and cupped his hands before his mouth. His breath rose in pale clouds between his fingers, then vanished, leaving them no warmer. He rubbed his palms together once, then let them fall.

Behind him, boots crunched softly over the snow.

"Thin ice," said a voice.

Mitya turned halfway. Rozanov stood a few paces behind, wrapped in his long coat, collar up, hat dusted with flakes. He looked as if he had been standing there for some time.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said. "Boys who ask too many questions always drift toward water. It's like gravity."

Mitya said nothing.

Rozanov stepped closer, pulled a small silver flask from his coat and offered it without ceremony. "For the cold," he said. "Or for what comes after it."

Mitya looked at the flask, then back to Rozanov. He shook his head once.

"No."

Rozanov studied him. His eyes were darker today, shadowed from lack of sleep or from something else that had taken root behind them.

"Suit yourself," he muttered, uncorking it and taking a brief sip. He didn't shiver.

They stood in silence, the ice creaking faintly at the river's edge, as if listening.

The stairs groaned under Anna's steps, though she moved lightly, as if not to wake something long dead. The door to Stepan's room was unlocked — slightly ajar, swaying faintly as the wind crept in through the drafty hall.

Inside, the air had gone cold. The fire in the stove was out, only a scatter of gray ash in the grate. A half-drunk cup of tea stood near the edge of the table, its surface still.

She stepped in and closed the door behind her.

The room was empty.

His coat was gone. The books remained, though some were out of place, as if rifled through in a hurry or reconsidered in the dark.

On the table, near the candle stub and the ash tray, lay a single sheet of folded paper, creased once, placed with the quiet deliberateness of something meant to be found.

Anna looked at it for a long while. She did not touch it at first. Her eyes traced the edge of the fold, the familiar tilt of the script on the outside.

She picked it up slowly, held it in both hands — heavy not in weight, but in stillness.

She did not read it.

Instead, she folded it again, more tightly this time, and slid it into the inside pocket of her coat.

Then she sat in the wooden chair by the stove, hands in her lap, and stared ahead at nothing.

Outside, snow drifted past the window like ash falling upward.

The corridor in Bubnov's building stretched long and dim, the gas lamps flickering against the stained wallpaper like breath trying to stay lit. His boots made no sound on the worn runner, though each step echoed faintly, a hollow rhythm without reply.

He walked slowly, hands clasped behind his back, head tilted slightly — not from thought, but from the sensation that something had shifted, imperceptibly, just beyond the reach of knowing.

As he passed the third door on the left — a room long unrented, the lock rusted, the key misplaced years ago — he heard it.

Laughter.

Brief. Dry. Like someone remembering a joke they hadn't shared.

He stopped. Listened.

Nothing.

He stepped back, one pace. The door stood closed, paint peeling at the hinges. He reached for the knob, hesitated, then turned it slowly.

The door opened without resistance.

The room was empty. Cold. Dust stirred in the weak light from the window, untouched by footprints. The hearth hadn't seen fire in years.

He stepped inside. Looked once to the corners, then up to the ceiling. Nothing.

But his hand trembled — faintly, at first, then more visibly as he let it fall to his side.

He turned, stepped out, and shut the door behind him.

This time, he locked it. The key scraped once, then clicked.

He remained still for a moment longer, then continued down the corridor, footsteps slightly faster now.

Outside the window, the snow in the courtyard lay smooth, perfect, untouched.

Mitya stood alone at the center of the bridge, where the iron railings were rimmed with ice and the city behind him had begun to blur into the falling snow. The river below was still moving — barely, slowly, a breath beneath the skin of ice that cracked in long, quiet lines.

In his hand, the letter.

The fold had softened with handling, the edges smudged where his thumb had traced them again and again. It bore no name, only a date. It was not long. It did not need to be.

He opened his hand and let it go.

The wind took it gently, more drift than fall, and the paper turned once in the air before settling onto the frozen crust of the Neva. For a moment it rested there, pale against the darkness, then slipped silently through a fracture and vanished into the black.

Mitya stood motionless. Then, in a voice barely louder than breath, he whispered something — not in Russian, not fully in any tongue at all. Perhaps a verse. Perhaps only a word for something he no longer believed.

The snow thickened.

He turned from the railing, pulled his coat tighter, and stepped down from the bridge.

His head was held high. His gait was steady.

He walked forward, into the white silence, and was soon lost in it.

Whether it was toward grace or despair, the city never asked. The snow covered all paths alike.